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ABSTRACT

Educators at Georgia Southern University began using a whole language approach to developmental literacy instruction by adapting the model David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky provide in "Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts." Rather than a focus on information retrieval and transfer, whole language curricula encourage students to engage in dialogues with texts to learn more about themselves and others. Each year, the educators have included more African American texts because the African American enrollment at the university doubled over a 5-year period. Students in the developmental studies whole language classes read novels and autobiographies from several cultures and write responses and essays in terms of their individual readings of texts and their personal experiences. One of the most important benefits of using whole books for reading instruction is that students have the opportunity to become sufficiently engrossed in a fictional world that they can identify with situations and characters. The students in whole language classes who read, discuss, and write about African American literature not only have extensive reading, writing, speaking, and listening experiences, but they also share the stories of their own personal experiences. In the process, their imaginations are being enlarged, their lives enriched, and what they learn could contribute significantly to the improvement of society. (RS)

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ON SEEING BLACK LITERATURE THROUGH BROWN AND BLUE EYES: TEACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN RACIALLY MIXED CLASSES

This article explains how whole language classes differ from traditional developmental classes which focus on functional literacy and illustrates with student writings how both African American and Caucasian students benefit from the whole language approach when reading, discussing, and writing about African American literature.

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ON SEEING BLACK LITERATURE THROUGH BROWN AND BLUE EYES: TEACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN RACIALLY MIXED CLASSES

Eurocentric education has traditionally been the foundation of all curricula in the United States. In the past few years, however, acknowledgment of cultural diversity in classrooms has become increasingly important to educators. Although African American instructors have always been expected to learn and teach Eurocentric literature, now white instructors must learn and teach African American literature with the same type of commitment and skill. Teaching African American literature to racially mixed classes requires more from white instructors than a liberal heart and good intentions, however.

An important issue is the question of authority: Who can talk about African American literature? Is a white instructor, who is better educated and more experienced than the students, always a more reliable authority? A related issue is the question of how African American students can be helped to feel more empowered in the classroom so that they are willing to participate fully in discussions and, thus, enrich the readings of all students in the class.

Various techniques can be used to help minority groups assume authority. First, reading responses encourage students to interact with a text and guarantee students the right to their own interpretations of a text. Second, using small groups for classroom discussion allows students to open up with two or three classmates rather than with thirty. Learning to speak in small groups may lead to confidence in larger ones. Third, student

writing can be reproduced--anonymously, if that is helpful--for classroom use. Students enjoy hearing each other's work, and when they know that their names will not be revealed, they have greater freedom and may produce more honest writing. Fourth, we can stop giving "guess-what-is-in-my-mind-and-you'll get an A" type exams. No matter how open instruction is, tests which require students to learn and accept the instructor's reading of a text send a negative message and, ultimately, undermine the progress we make toward empowering our students as readers and writers.

To incorporate these techniques into our classrooms, some of us at Georgia Southern University have been using a whole language approach to developmental literacy instruction for the past few years. Developmental reading and writing classes have traditionally focused on <u>functional literacy</u>. Therefore, instruction is based on the belief that the purpose of developmental reading classes is to help students learn to decode information efficiently. Conversely, the purpose of developmental writing is to teach students to transcribe information correctly. Because functional literacy focuses on preparing students for the necessities of daily life and the professional duties of a complex technological society, students are taught that meaning resides in the text. As a result of such instruction, developmental readers and writers all too often see the written word as little more than a gatekeeping hurdle. They fail to perceive that both reading and writing can give shape to their personal feelings and thoughts.

Whole language courses, however, are based on another

conceptualization of the purpose for literacy. Rather than a focus on information retrieval and transfer, whole language curricula encourage students to engage in dialogues with texts to learn more about themselves and others. Personal growth can thus be gained through reading and writing. In whole language classes, students read to find meaning which is personally significant to them. There is no single "correct" meaning for a text because meaning is constructed from each reader's transaction with the text. Each reading of a text is, therefore, unique. Through small group and full class discussions, students begin to recognize that the meaning a reader derives from any text is dependent on his or her background experiences. In whole language classes, students read books and write papers that relate to their own experiences. Reading and writing assignments can be sequenced to examine any topic that relates to the interests of the students.

We began using a whole language approach with our developmental students by adapting the model David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky provide in Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts. We also used their theme of Growth and Change in Adolescence for the reading and writing assignments because most of our students are recent high school graduates. Although we have continued to use the same adapted model and the same theme, we have each year included more African American texts because the African American enrollment at our regional university has almost doubled during the past five years. We now have about a 75% Caucasian to a 25% African American ratio in our 14,000

student enrollment. In the developmental classes, however, that percentage is skewed. For example, in one whole language class I taught last year, one half of the students were African Americans. In a second class, 80% were African American and only 20% were Caucasian.

Because many of our Caucasian students are from white, middle class, rural communities, they enter our classes relatively unaware of any culture other than their own. In one class discussion last fall, a student announced to the entire class that he didn't see why we had to read all this Black literature because, according to the 1990 census, African Americans comprised only 13% of the total U.S. population. For the next few weeks his African American classmates called him the "13% guy" and refused to work in groups with him. After a few days of this type of treatment, the student complained to the instructor that he was being "blackballed" by his own classmates. This same "13% guy," at the end of the quarter in reply to the question, "What did you like least about the course?," wrote, "I <u>least</u> liked being in the minority." What is most interesting, however, is the second part of his answer when he added, "but I now appreciate the opportunity--and I really mean that."

The following student writings have all come from these Developmental Studies whole language classes where students read novels and autobiographies from several cultures and write responses and essays in terms of their individual readings of texts and their personal experiences. The first reading assignment for these classes is generally an autobiography of a young person's coming-of-age experience. In an in-class response

to Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi, an autobiography of a young, black civil rights activist who took part in the sit-ins during the 1960's, Christy wrote:

> I could not get over how cruel the whites were. It hurts me to know my ancestors had such cold hearts. I believe that maybe all of the whites were not prejudiced; maybe they just did what they were taught to do. When I finished reading this book, I was ashamed of my color, and I couldn't believe my race could have hated someone so much that they would beat them and kill them.
>
> When I read about the beatings and how the cops hauled them to jail in garbage trucks, I got very angry. I was angry at America itself. When the part came up about the KKK and Anne found her picture on a flyer, I couldn't believe it. It amazed me about how open the KKK was about killing people. Even though Anne knew she was next on the Klan list, it didn't stop her. She was one of the bravest people I know. Her will power was unbelievable. . . . I admire this book a lot because it helps me set higher goals for myself.

One of the most important benefits of using whole books for reading instruction is that students have the opportunity to become sufficiently engrossed in a fictional world that they can identify with situations and characters, as Christy did. That experience is rarely, if ever, possible when students read only selections from longer works.

The book we read after Coming of Age in Mississippi was The

Diary of Anne Frank. A number of students in the class responded to Anne Frank by writing that they had never known any other people had as hard a time as Blacks, but that they now thought that "Jews had maybe had even worse troubles." What was most surprising--and perhaps it shouldn't have been--was that these students knew almost nothing about either World War II or the civil rights movement. To them, both were ancient history. By reading the autobiographies of adolescents caught in those time periods, the worlds of these 1990's students are being enlarged, and they are learning a great deal about adolescent experiences very unlike their own.

Last year an African American colleague and I decided to teach Ernest Gaines A Gathering of Old Men with the express purpose of determining whether students would write more honestly about racial tensions to an instructor of their own race. After the students had written reading responses and discussed the book, they had a writing assignment which asked if they had ever experienced discrimination of any kind. In response to this assignment, Jeff wrote the following concluding paragraph to his first draft:

> In today's world blacks have more rights than any white person living. If you are a black person in today's world you have it made because the government will make sure of it. The government gives Blacks tax breaks and food stamps because they are too lazy to get off their butts and work for a living. The white men have to take care of them with their taxes. It just isn't right for this country to live

like that when they can do something to get money and food but they just want to live off the white man's taxes. This problem will be a big problem now because Clinton is a Black lover and he isn't going to help the white man at all.

Very obviously, Jeff would not have written such words to an African American instructor. That he thought twice about writing them at all is revealed by the fact that he deleted this whole paragraph from his final draft -- which left his essay with absolutely no conclusion at all. At the very least, Jeff is gaining an awareness that not every white person is going to share his views. Because very few students of either race have had the opportunity to read, discuss, and write about African American texts in elementary or secondary school, students from both races are gaining a great deal of awareness about themselves as well as each other.

Many African American students come to college after years of feeling excluded from the educational system. In a journal entry near the beginning of the quarter, Jocelyn wrote,

> In elementary school and in high school there isn't much in the books that tells about black people. I want to know more about black people besides slavery. I want to know something good about black people. I want to read and learn about black kings and queens. Every year since elementary school in the month of February we learn a little about black history and that is slavery. Maybe to keep hearing about the slavery days will keep black people proud of something. It depresses me. I'm proud of who I am, but

I want to know something good about black people. I know that I am studying this in college, but I wanted to know about it in high school.

At the end of the quarter, Jocelyn continued this same train of thought in her portfolio cover letter:

The most valuable thing about the reading I have done this quarter is the stories I read that taught me about my race's background. Most of the books we read were by black authors, and I value that because before when I was assigned a reading assignment it was by a white author. Books that are written by whites are usually love stories or what they have done that is so significant, and all of their stories have fairy tale endings. These types of stories don't capture my interest. I find these stories to be very boring. . . .

The readings I have done in this course have taught me many different things. When I read Black Boy, I learned that child abuse is like a chain, it goes down the generations; I also learned how cruel whites were to blacks. In Speaking Out, I learned that racism and prejudices do not solely exist between blacks and whites, but it exists between many other races, religions, and genders. The story The Bluest Eye taught me how low self esteem can affect someone mentally. A Raisin in the Sun taught me how blacks struggle to survive. This reading class has opened many doors for me that were closed in the past.

Jocelyn's journal entries give a personal voice to Henry Gates' lamentation that in most K-12 classes, the Eurocentric canon remains entrenched (12-13). Lacking the opportunity to read the literature and history of their own people, African American students all too often "turn off" education at an early age because they find that school has little relevance to their own lives. The result is, as Glenda Gill has pointed out, "a shocking drop-out rate, an alarming number of imprisoned black men, and untold damage--to psyches, souls and dreams" (225).

In a 1992 article entitled "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching," Maxine Hairston maintains that instructors should not bring such controversial issues as race or gender into the classroom because she believes that such issues may disrupt the learning process. The research that illustrates that individuals comprehend and retain more readily material that includes their own experiences is more compelling, however. As Lily Wong-Fillmore and Concepcion Valadez have argued, the academic potential of all learners, whether culturally different or well within the traditional mainstream, has the best chance "of being realized when their language skills, their social and cultural experiences, and their knowledge of the world are affirmed in school; these are the foundations of academic development" (654).

The students in whole language classes who read, discuss, and write about African American literature not only have extensive reading, writing. speaking, and listening experiences, but they also share the stories of their individual readings of the texts as well as the stories of their own personal experiences. In the process, their imaginations are being

enlarged, their lives enriched, and what they learn could contribute significantly to the improvement of our society. If so, Brown Eyes and Blue Eyes may someday be able to see white and black as the neutral colors they are, and then perhaps we can all begin to share a vision for the future of our country.

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